SUMMARY OF THE TRANSITION COMMITTEE MEETING JULY 1, 1998

The Transition Committee of the National Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Conference (NELAC) met on Wednesday, July 1, 1998, at 8:30 a.m. Central Daylight Time (CDT) as part of the Fourth NELAC Annual Meeting in San Antonio, TX. The meeting was led by its chair, Dr. Charles D. Brokopp of the Utah Department of Health. A list of action items is given in Attachment A. A list of participants is given in Attachment B.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Brokopp opened the meeting by introducing the members of the Committee. He then asked Dr. Eldert Hartwig, who was instrumental in the formation of the Committee in 1996, to review the Committee's charter. Dr. Hartwig commented on the critical charge of the Committee to assist in the transition from the NELAC standards-writing phase to that of full NELAP implementation. Dr. Brokopp then reviewed the agenda for the meeting.

FOLLOW-UP FROM INTERIM MEETING

Dr. Brokopp provided an update of recommendations coming out of the NELAC Interim Meeting, held in January 1998 in Virginia. These included: a) deadlines for submittal and approval of applications by potential accrediting authorities; b) consideration of the terms "reciprocity" and "recognition;" c) the two-tiered accreditation process; and d) the time line for approval of accrediting authorities that meet all standards but need to update their legislation or rules.

UPDATE ON PROFICIENCY TESTING

Dr. Kenneth Jackson, NELAC Board of Directors ombudsman to the Proficiency Testing Committee, provided an update on issues regarding proficiency testing (PT). He commented on the status of the externalization of the EPA's water (WS and WP) testing programs. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) is making good progress in preparing to serve as the proficiency testing oversight body (PTOB) to the National Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program (NELAP). Because NIST is not currently prepared to accredit PT providers, existing PT providers should continue to be used as laboratory sources for those samples.

STATUS OF ACCREDITING AUTHORITY APPROVAL AND RECOGNITION

Ms. Jeanne Mourrain then provided an update on the status of accrediting authority applications by listing the 19 states/20 potential accrediting authorities that initially applied (AR, CA, CO, DE, FL, ID, IL, KS, LA, MD, NH, NJ, NY, OR[2], PA, TX, UT, VA AND WV). She reported that the first phases of the completeness and technical reviews are underway and progressing well.

Ms. Mourrain described the typical composition of the accrediting authority review teams that will perform site visits to consist of one EPA official, one other Federal or state official, and one NELAC official. She mentioned that training workshops for accrediting authority site assessors have been held in Illinois and Texas.

To concerns about whether NELAP will accredit some of the initial states if others in the first group do not qualify, the decision was made to accredit those that qualify without waiting for all states in the group to be prepared. This is being done so that the first group of states can receive full NELAP accreditation by early 1999. The first group of laboratories will hopefully be accredited within a year (January 2000). Concerns were raised by several state representatives about how their states will transition from its own programs to NELAP. The Committee agreed to develop guidelines to assist states in the critical transition between their own programs and NELAP. There was much discussion about how long it will take, how difficult it will be, and how much it will cost, for states to implement NELAP requirements and accredit laboratories. A site visit has already been conducted in Colorado and attempts will be made to schedule all remaining site visits by September, 1998. To a question about the composition of the Accrediting Authority Review Board (AARB), Ms. Mourrain reported that AARB will consist of one EPA official and perhaps two or three representatives from the states.

Concerns were also expressed about the ability of the initial group of approved accrediting authorities to handle the large number of applications from the laboratories. Dr. Jackson proposed that the initial group of accrediting authorities will easily be able to handle the workload. To a specific request from the audience, Mr. Jerry Parr offered to take to the Environmental Laboratory Advisory Board (ELAB) the idea of developing data from the laboratories on how many will apply, and to which accrediting authority. There was much concern that NELAC provide to all states a full schedule for laboratory applications to accrediting authorities. Mr. Parr suggested that care be taken to provide this kind of information to as many laboratories as possible, using as many mass media as are appropriate.

Ms. Mourrain mentioned that none of the states that have applied for approval to be NELAP accrediting authorities has plans to use third-party assessors, but California has plans to do so and Virginia or West Virginia has set aside funding to do so. Concerns were raised about how a state can ensure selecting an appropriate third-party assessor when no NELAP approval process currently exists for third-party assessors. The Committee responded that this is a state's decision, and that it comes with some risk to the state.

Questions were raised about the plans of the EPA Regional Offices to become accrediting authorities. None has applied to date, but when one does, the approval process will be handled internally by EPA. States' representatives in the audience felt the EPA Regional Offices should undergo a review that is as rigorous as that which the states will undergo. Dr. Brokopp offered that the Committee might develop some clarification on the proposed process for accreditation of the EPA Regional Offices.

Comments were heard concerning the review of assessor qualifications, and provisions in Chapter 6 of the NELAC Standards allowing for "witnessed site assessments." Dr. Brokopp

closed this discussion with an invitation for any attendee to submit questions regarding transition to the Committee.

USE OF CURRENT OR AMENDED NELAC STANDARDS

Dr. Brokopp asked for discussion on issues regarding the merits of using various versions of standards (currently approved versus revised or amended revisions), as well as guidelines for coming into compliance with revised standards. Accrediting authorities will be evaluated to the standards in effect at the time of application, and will have two years to come into compliance with any revisions. Mr. Anderson noted that this issue is addressed in Section 6.5 of the NELAC Standards. Evaluation of the current group of accrediting authority applicants will be done to the Standards approved at the 1997 NELAC Annual Meeting.

Mr. Anderson reminded the audience that those states that apply between January 1, 1998, and June 30, 2000, to be accrediting authorities have a two-year grace period to come into full compliance with NELAC Standards. After that date, the applicant will have to be in full and immediate compliance.

There was much concern about the amount of time the laboratory community will be given to come into compliance with any revised standards. Recommendations from the Committee ranged from one to five years; the Committee agreed to take this concern under advisement and to seek input form the laboratory community as to the appropriateness of the one-year adoption grace period. Dr. Brokopp stated that the Committee might take the one-year recommendation to the NELAC Board of Directors. Laboratories are very concerned whether they will be held accountable to the 1997 version, or 1998 version, of the Standards, and the time line for coming into full compliance. There being very diverse opinions among Committee members and audience participants alike regarding the adoption period issue, Dr. Brokopp decided that this Committee, and perhaps others within NELAC, enter into further deliberation instead of offering an immediate recommendation.

ESTABLISHMENT OF ACCREDITING AUTHORITY REVIEW BOARD

Dr. Brokopp reminded the audience that Ms. Mourrain continues to seek qualified candidates to serve on the Accrediting Authority Review Board. Applications should be directed to her attention.

OLD BUSINESS / NEW BUSINESS

The scheduled time allotment for the meeting having been exhausted, the meeting was adjourned by Dr. Brokopp promptly at 10:30 a.m. Central Standard Time with no discussion of old or new business.

Attachment A

ACTION ITEMS
TRANSITION COMMITTEE
JULY 1, 1998

Item No.	Action Item	Date To Be Completed
1.	With NELAC, develop guidelines to assist states in handling the critical period of time as they transition from their own programs to NELAP.	
2.	Clarify effective dates NELAC Standards.	
3.	Respond to frequently asked questions.	
4.	Collect information on laboratories' intent to request NELAP accreditation.	

Attachment B

PARTICIPANTS
TRANSITION COMMITTEE
JULY 1, 1998

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